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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - DECEMBER 29, 2006

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1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT

2. Russian Bank Acquires Belvneshekonombank

On December 22, Vneshekonombank chairman Vladimir Dmitriyev stated that the Russian bank intends to increase its share in

Belvneshekonombank's authorized capital to have a controlling stake in the Belarusian bank. According to Dmitriyev, Vneshekonombank sees increasing their presence in the Belabusian banking sector as a priority toward strengthening integration processes between Belarus and Russia.

ELECTIONS

13. Lebedko Denied Permission to Meet with Voters

On December 27, independent media reported that Minsk city authorities denied senior Belarusian opposition leader and United Civic Party chair Anatoliy Lebedko permission to hold election rallies in Minsk. Lebedko had applied for permission to hold several meetings with voters to inform them about the situation in the country, promote the party's program and the European Union's new strategy toward Belarus. Lebedko indicated that he would defy the city authorities' ban and hold unauthorized meetings with voters.

14. Authorities Drop Charge Against Oppositionist

On December 26, Mogilev's Oktyabrsky District Executive Committee dropped charges against opposition activist Kristina Shatikova finding that her actions were legal. Shatikova had been detained by police officers while carrying 4,000 copies of several newspapers in her bag on November 30. The activist was charged with the distribution of illegal printed materials and the newspapers were seized.

15. BPF Deputy Chairman and Youth Activist Sentenced

On December 26, Minsk's Sovetskiy District Court sentenced Belarusian Popular Front deputy chairman and candidate for the Minsk City Council Ales Mikhalevich and young opposition activist Vasily Lepesh to five days in jail on a disorderly conduct

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charge. Mikhalevich was arrested on the night of December 22 while hosting a Christmas party at his residence.

16. Address by Opposition Candidate Not Broadcast

On December 28, independent media reported that the Gomel election commission alleged that Conservative Christian Party member and candidate in Rechitskiy Electoral District No. 27 Vladimir Ivanovich Shitikov violated the Electoral Code in his radio address. The five-minute pre-recorded address to air on December 28 was never broadcast. Shitikov told independent media that he had spoken about how the current regime violates human rights, falsifies elections and destroys the language and culture of Belarus.

CIVIL SOCIETY

17. Judge Adjourns New Life Church Hearing

On December 22, Supreme Economic Court Judge Yekaterina Korotkevich adjourned the New Life Church's lawsuit against the Minsk City Executive Committee's decision to take away a building and an adjacent land plot that the Protestant community bought in 2002 to conduct worship. Korotkevich cited the need to review the five new petitions filed by the church that day. Korotkevich agreed to consider three petitions after January 7, 2007, including requests that authorities grant the building the status of a house of prayer and compensate the New Life Church for court costs estimated at USD 855.

GOVERNMENT

18. Central Election Commission Chair Reappointed

On December 27, Aleksandr Lukashenko reappointed Lidiya Yermoshina as chair of the Central Commission for Elections and National Referendums. He also reappointed Nadezhda Kiselyova, Marina Kozlovich, Nikolay Lozovik, Valery Mitskevich and Vladimir Kholod as members of the commission.

19. Lukashenko Makes End-of-Year Government Appointments

On December 26, President Lukashenko made several government appointments, including: Raisa Savritskaya as Deputy Chair of the State Control Committee; Sergey Baranovskiy as Chief of the State Customs Committee's Financial Investigations Department; Aleksandr Binetskiy as Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian State Radio and Television Company; Vladimir Malets as Deputy Minister of Construction and Architecture; Marianna Shchetkina as Deputy Minister of Labor and Social protection; Vladimir Amarin as Deputy Finance Minister; Aleksandr Bileychik as Deputy Justice Minister; Ivan Shcherbo as Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications; Aleksandr Lyakhov as Director General of the Belorusneft oil company; and Vladimir Zametalin as Director General of Belarusfilm.

DOMESTIC ECONOMY

10. Main 2006 Economic Targets To Be Met

On December 26, Prime Minister Sergey Sidorskiy stated that all 2006 economic development targets would be met, creating a basis for a successful economic performance in 2007. Sidorskiy also emphasized the importance of science in increasing industrial output.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

11. Belarus, Cuba Interested in Joint Projects

On December 28, Cuban Ambassador Omar Medina Quintero stated that Cuba and Belarus are interested in joint projects that would involve other Latin American countries. He noted that Belarus and Cuba would continue developing bilateral cooperation in education, healthcare and transportation. Belarus and Cuba concentrate on cooperation in the manufacturing of vaccines and medicines based on Cuba's experience in the sphere of biotechnologies. According to Quintero, such cooperation could be established with Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil and Nicaragua.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

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12. GOB Promotes Russian Idea

On December 22, during a convention of the pro-GOB Union of Writers of Belarus, Russian Writers Union representative Larisa Baranova-Boychenko lauded the Belarusian government for promoting "the Russian idea":

"The two main components of this idea -- Orthodoxy and authoritarianism -- exist here. That's why they love your president as a brother in Russia."

MOORE